



Volume 11
Issue 3 *Spring*

Article 16

3-15-1992

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Recommended Citation

Hill, Dale W. (1992) "The Marble Shark," *Westview*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 3 , Article 16.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol11/iss3/16>

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THE MARBLE SHARK

by Dale W. Hill

"What's the matter, Son?" my dad asked me one evening after school. We lived at Marland where Dad was the principal. The school at the time was a big, two-storied construction with parallel sidewalks that ran north and south out front. "Aw, nothin', Dad. It wouldn't be any use to talk about it. I'm just not good at much of anything." Oh, I was a good student, but for adolescents and pre-teens, schooling doesn't seem to fill up the emotional well as those important, unimportant things do.

"Well, it won't hurt to talk about it," my dad urged. Dad wasn't one to play with his kids. There were four of us, three boys and one girl, and we were all subject, at times, to the painful experience of having a principal for a parent, and worse than that, living right across from the school.

"Well," I managed, "I just can't play marbles. Mike LeClair stayed after school again; him and Ray took all of my marbles. I didn't stand a chance." Mike was three years older than I was, and, as a Ponca Indian, would wait around after school to take all of my marbles and any other suckered victim. Pockets bulging, Mike would run the eight miles to his house this side of the Salt Fork River across from White Eagle.

Ray was the athlete in the family. It seems he was good at everything: baseball, basketball, track, and even marbles. A year

older, Ray was the oldest in the family but struggled in school badly. What Mike didn't win, Ray would.

"Get some marbles," Dad ordered. "Let's go outside and let me see what you're doing."

I was stunned. Surely Dad knew nothing about marbles. He was raised around Granite in Southwest Oklahoma and attended school at Ozark. The school has been replaced by a salvage yard now; but Dad never talked much about his Alma Mater, though he had said that he lived the last school year, after his parents moved to Caddo County, with the high-school coach so his team would have the advantage of Dad's "running two-handed corner shot."

I rounded up some marbles and soon we were out by the side of that teacherage drawing a cats-eye pot.

"Go ahead and shoot," said Dad, after placing a half dozen marbles or so inside the pot's boundaries.

I got up close to the pot, took any old marble and put it between my thumb and forefinger and watched as my marble moved a couple of marbles and then stayed in the cat's eye. I began crying out of frustration; emotional, I could never contain my tears.

"That's what always happens. If I'm not stuck in the pot, Ray or Mike will kill me."

"Watch this," my dad said. He stood

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about ten feet away from the marbles, put his marble in between his thumb and finger and then rolled the marble to the tip of his finger and thumb knuckle. He shot—how he shot. His marble was directed at the pot like a bullet, knocking four or five marbles out, then spun safely a few feet away ready to shoot again.

Tears had been replaced with amazement. My dad was a marble player!

"Son, that's all we did when I was in school, that and tops! Let me show you how I did that." It wasn't all Dad did at Ozark either, as I was to find out my first year at the University of Oklahoma.

"Let's go to the union, and I'll show you how to play snooker," I told him one time when he was up visiting. We were never allowed to linger around beer joints and pool parlors, and my first taste of that pastime was during my Freshman Year. It took only a couple of crafty shots to realize that I had again been "snookered." There must have been a pool hall near Ozark.

After high school, marriage, and the CCC camp, my dad and mother moved to California to work in the shipyard as welders during World War II. Soon the Army beckoned, and Mother moved back to Broxton where I was born.

As Dad and his buddies stormed Okinawa, and only three days into action, he was wounded with shots to the stomach and arm. An almost full recovery brought him back to Oklahoma where he enrolled at Southwestern in Weatherford. His first, full-time teaching job was at Marland, where he became the shop teacher and principal.

My mother went back to school after

her youngest enrolled in kindergarten and after graduation took a job at Newkirk. Soon Dad and the rest of the family followed, where he retired as an elementary counselor. Even after retirement, Dad donated his time counseling students each week, always refusing to attend the annual, area reunion at Granite.

"My dad wouldn't be caught dead at a reunion like that," I told Roy Snow, the superintendent at Anadarko, shortly after he had taken over the helm. Roy was heading up the Reunion Committee, I think, when I told him where Dad graduated.

That evening, I called Dad and laughed about what I had told Mr. Snow.

"Well, that just goes to show that you don't know everything," Dad, now in his seventieth year and only three months before his death, said sternly. "Your mother and I have a motel room reserved for that weekend in Granite. We're both going this year."

Could I play marbles? You bet? After Dad's tutelage, I no longer went home empty-pocketed; after all, when a player's skills match up, then, like football, luck and mistakes have more to do with the outcome than strategy and skill.

My oldest brother works in Tucson now, where he owns his own tool business after retiring from the Air Force. My youngest brother is stationed as a commissioned officer at the Pentagon and will soon be moving to Bangkok, Thailand with his Chinese wife—while my sister and I struggle to live on school teachers' salaries. There's more to life than marbles and snooker; and looking back, I guess more than marbles rubbed off the "ol' marble shark" from Ozark. ■

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